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CHINESE AND JAPANESE  
BROCADES

THE history of brocades in China and even in Japan unfortunately remains to be written. The material is plentiful, the reproductions even are easily available, but so far nobody has studied the development and the changes of designs; at least, they have not been published or treated so

Sir Aurel Stein found in Khotan in Chinese Turkestan quantities of weaves dating from 100 B. C. on. The Japanese storehouse of the Shoso-in in Nara, formed in 749, contains brocades, silks, and embroideries in great numbers. In Europe we find Chinese brocades of the fourteenth century, from the time when silks began to be obtained by trade with the East. We have many collections of small samples gath-



JAPANESE YAMATO NISHIKI BROCADE  
END OF THE XVII CENTURY

thoroughly as has been done in the case of European designs which, superficially at least, we can date easily by their style. At first sight the extreme conservatism of the Chinese in matters of design seems to make the task a very difficult one, but on nearer study we find that the treatment of the classic motives has varied with the times just as it did in Western countries, even curiously keeping pace with the changes in general feeling and style as they occurred unknown in Europe.

For the history of Chinese textile designs wonderful treasures are available.

ered in China and Japan and some Japanese books with reproductions, but the text when translated tells us, what we could see ourselves, that the design is one of dragons on a blue ground, or plum blossoms on red; perhaps it tells us also that the design is known under a certain name, but the period in which it was made or the place where it originated is left an open question.

Tradition, the great unwritten book in all Eastern countries, certainly exists, connoisseurs and specially families of weavers have valuable knowledge handed down to them by generations of keen art

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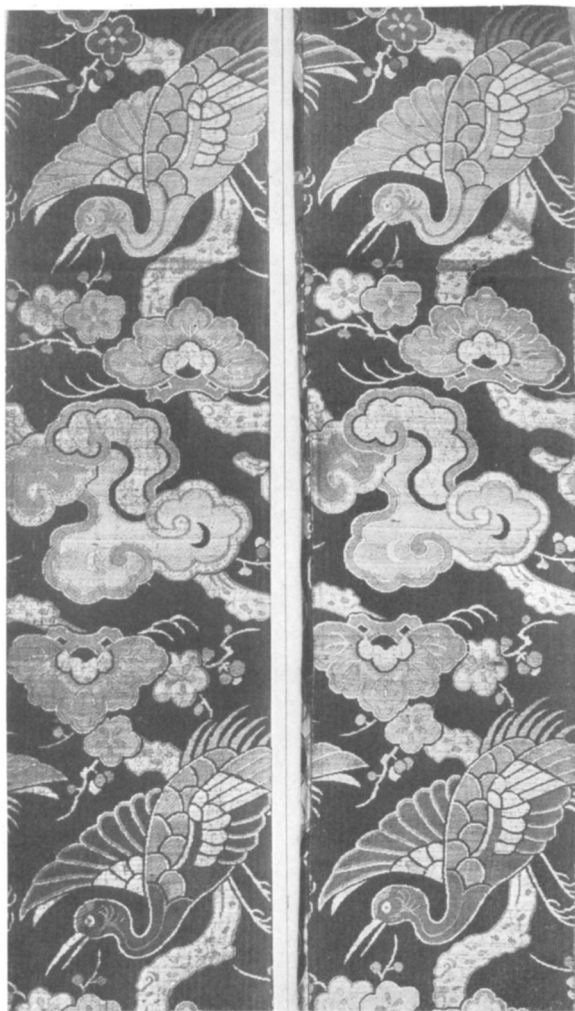
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# BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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JAPANESE NISHIKI BROCADE, END OF THE XVII CENTURY

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lovers, but this information is difficult of access to occidental students and what reaches us has to be taken with great circumspection, only rarely has reliable information been given. Therefore, specially for early specimens we have to rely chiefly on the rare pieces that have been preserved in Europe which are dated by historical events, or authenticated by early inventories.

The earliest brocades reached Europe when, toward the end of the Sung and dur-

Chinese designs were freely copied and adapted. Persian palmettes were spread over the rich brocades, semi-Arab inscriptions formed wonderful borders, though they spelled no sense, Chinese dragons and phoenixes alternated with Persian animals. Specially the Chinese peony scroll designs proved a decorative motive of great value.

Although the *panni tartarichi* (Tartar cloths) are continually mentioned in old inventories, unfortunately few remain and



CHINESE KINRAN BROCADE  
XV CENTURY

ing the Yüan period (1280-1368), the followers of Genghis Khan, who first invaded, then ruled China, spread the Chinese silks all over their great empire and traded them with Western dealers. Quantities of rich brocades must have been brought to Venice and spread all over Italy in those days; a few remain, but a great many now destroyed left their traces in the designs of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian brocades. When the Gothic influence began to be felt in classic and conservative Italy, when freer designs replaced the severe and geometrical Romanesque patterns, the Persian, Arab, and

can be identified. The earliest known pieces are found amongst the vestments of Pope Benedict XI, murdered in Perugia in 1304, which are kept in San Domenico, Perugia, where the pope is buried. Tradition ascribes these wonderful vestments to him and doubt seems unjustified, an inventory of 1458 describes them, and I suppose Dr. Falcke is mistaken when he says in his book that they were found in Pope Benedict XI's tomb when it was opened in the nineteenth century. Even for the benefit of the sacristy of San Domenico a pope beatified in 1773 would hardly have been deprived of his vest-

ments. Amongst these vestments, wherever they came from, are a pair of "calzare," a kind of wide stockings worn during the celebration of the pontifical mass and made of Chinese brocade with a minute flower design in gold on a white ground. Of these more hereafter. Then there is the dalmatic, of Chinese silk damask, which, made for Charles IV (crowned in 1340), was used at the coronation of the German emperors and is preserved in the

intact and form nowadays the greatest treasure of admirable fourteenth- and fifteenth-century brocades. Here we find the Lucca brocades of pure Gothic design and those composed after Chinese or Persian patterns side by side with pure Chinese weaves.

The most easily discovered sign of their Chinese origin is the way in which the gold is used. In Europe pure gold and silver-gilt threads or narrow strips were woven in



JAPANESE NISHIKI BROCADE  
MIDDLE OF THE XVIII CENTURY

Vienna Hofburg; and several pieces amongst the great wealth of early vestments found in the sacristies of the Lutheran churches of Dantzic, Halberstadt, and Brunswick. When at the Reformation these North German towns became Lutheran, the treasures of the churches were not destroyed, as was unfortunately the case in so many Calvinistic countries; the pictures remained in their places and the vestments, no longer wanted, were simply locked away. The result is that while in Catholic churches the vestments continued to be used and to deteriorate till they had to be replaced, these remained

the brocade. This, by the way, proved fatal to their preservation, because when the material was old or tarnished, the brocade was burnt to extract the precious metal. Also at that time but specially later, threads of linen were wound round with gilt gold beater's skin, which was perhaps a method partly copied from the Chinese technique. The Chinese, in fact, used flat strips of gilt catgut and later gilt paper. For this purpose sheets of strong, tough paper made of mulberry fiber were gilded on one side and then cut into narrow strips varying in width with the quality of the tissue. This method is conservatively used up to

now both in China and Japan, only much later threads wound with similar gilt paper were used.

In the exhibition of Japanese and Chinese brocades opened on February 14 we find as the earliest specimens three pieces from the vestments of Pope Benedict XI, mentioned before. They illustrate admirably the three different kinds of technique described. In a piece of white Lucca brocade from the Pope's sandal the golden feet of the falcons are woven with linen threads wound round with gilt gold



JAPANESE KANAJI NISHIKI BROCADE  
MIDDLE OF THE XVIII CENTURY

beater's skin. A piece of ribbon border, also from the shoe, has flat strips of gilt-silver; and a piece of gold brocade, part of the calzare previously described, which is a Chinese weave and has a minute floral design on a white ground, is woven with flat strips of gilt catgut which on the back, darkened by age, looks almost like leather, in fact, it is often described as such. The pattern is so small that it is hardly discernible on the front, but the photograph taken from the back shows the handsome design plainly. The interest of this dated piece in the present exhibition lies in the comparison with pieces similar in technique and design which hang on the wall over it. Some of them are early Chinese, others Japanese made in the same style after Chinese types.

The object and the scope of the present exhibition is not, however, to give a historical review of the development of Far Eastern brocades. The material, for the greater part acquired lately, is shown primarily with the object of giving that delight to the eye which sumptuous and beautiful brocades never fail to produce. The rich material, woven in beautiful and tasteful designs, in the play of light and shade gives a sensation of splendor and beauty which has always fascinated the eye. The orientals have been masters in this charming art, the Chinese and their pupils the Japanese as much as the Persians and the Indians. At present only the Chinese and Japanese brocades are shown; of these the greater part have been used for Buddhist priest's robes, a square mantle worn over the right shoulder and looped up under the left arm. The Buddhist priests having made vows of poverty wore patched robes, pieced together out of small pieces, the number fixed by the religious ritual. In the choice of the gorgeous brocades poverty was, however, forgotten unless the fact is considered that often rich garments dedicated to the temple were cut in pieces for the purpose. In Japan specially in the seventeenth century the robes used for the Nō dance were often given to the temples for this purpose. The Nō dance is a classic drama performed by persons of high social standing. Three of these Nō robes in their original state are shown, they are made of what is called Kara-ori, a brocade of which the floss silk flowers and ornaments are laid in by hand, that is, the floss silk is not passed right through partly out of sight, as would be the case in modern brocades.

The main object in arranging this collection has been to show the designers and silk workers, at the moment when rich gold and silver brocades are in such great demand, the finest Chinese and Japanese examples. The variety of designs and the wonderful color schemes to be found in these beautiful pieces will surely prove of great help and interest to all those interested in textiles. At first sight it may strike one as a pity that the material has

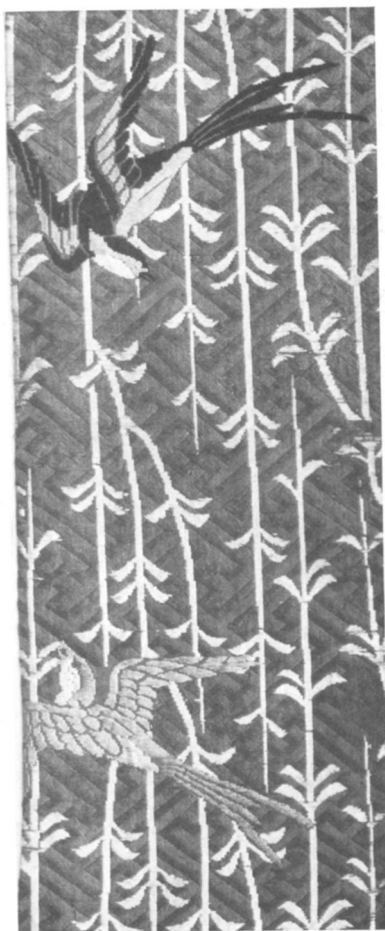
been cut up into small pieces to make priest's robes, because it destroys the run and the continuity of the design; it has, however, the great advantage that it shows clearly what the effect of the brocade would be in actual use. It is a well-known fact that the design never shows in the same way when the piece is made up as it does hanging out straight, when the regular repetition and juxtaposition of the motives can be plainly followed; folds and seams cut up the design exactly as the Buddhist vows did the old brocade intended for priest's robes; at the same time many of the pieces are amply large enough to allow the student to follow and to copy the design. Photographs of the most interesting pieces have been made and are obtainable in large reproductions.

The history of brocade, as said before, is as yet very incomplete. We know that it was made in China at a very early date, the pieces found in Khotan show that already as early as 100 B. C., the art was by no means in its infancy. Further tradition says that the Chinese Emperor Mingti sent, in 238 A. D., presents of silk to Japan consisting of brocades with a design of dragons on crimson but that only in 463 the first looms were established in Nara by the Emperor Kotoku. We can judge of the excellence of the brocades made in those days by the pieces kept in the Shoso-in storehouse in Nara which were dedicated to the To-dai-ji temple in 749.

At the end of the eighth century the capital was removed from Nara to Kyoto and the imperial looms as well; from then on Kyoto remained the home of the silk weavers but the great period for the Japanese looms did not begin till the golden period of Hideyoshi the great Taiko, when the two famous looms of Sakai near Osaka and Nishijin near Kyoto were started; then during the Momoyama period, a time of great wealth and splendor, brocade weaving became a great national industry.

Before that period, however, some famous pieces, now very highly valued, were made by celebrated weavers, but the bulk of the brocades used in Japan came from China and were called Kara-ori Nishiki "Chinese woven brocades," a name which, oddly enough, was later applied to a special kind of brocade well represented in our collection, which is very typically Japanese, in fact, the one kind which does not show any Chinese influence.

Calling the brocades by their Japanese names they are divided into three main groups: first, the Nishiki or colored brocade, literally "beautiful color combination" in which different colors and gold were woven on a plain or figured ground. Then the Kinran, which means bright gold or gold brocade, here the pattern is woven in narrow strips of gold on a plain colored ground. In the earliest Chinese specimens the gold used consisted of strips of catgut



JAPANESE KARA-ORI BROCADE  
MIDDLE OF THE XVII CENTURY

or parchment gilt on one side, later tough paper was used, as it still is today. And lastly the Kara ori or Chinese woven brocades in which together with gold and different colors the chief design is woven in with floss silk.

These main groups are sometimes combined and intermixed but their essential character remains. The Chinese weaves of the two classes first mentioned have remained of paramount excellence; they are recognizable by their subtlety and the softness of their material. The Nishiki or plain brocade was brought from China to Japan at a very early date, as already mentioned; the Kinran was first taken over in the eleventh century by returning Japanese students and soon came into great favor for priest's robes; while the Kara ori was an outcome of the luxurious sixteenth century in Japan and the Momoyama period.

The different kinds of brocades are placed separately on different walls, the Chinese prototypes in the center; the labels indicate to which class they belong, and their approximate dates, information which is given by the Japanese connoisseur who formed the greater part of the collection and who by descent and taste is intimately acquainted with the textile art of his country.

As of general interest on the subject some books with reproductions of designs on Japanese silks are shown and also a small collection of original designs of the seventeenth century for Japanese dyed, stenciled, and embroidered silks, while in Room H 11, the collection of Chinese portraits of the Ming period (1368-1644), lent by Samuel T. Peters, shows in the garments of the sitters many interesting brocades as they were used.

S. C. B. R.



CHINESE MING BROCADE  
END OF THE XVI CENTURY